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RANDOM NOTES OF A MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHER IN EUROPE

By MARIAN P. WHITNEY

DURING a stay of seven months in Europe last year, I spent some weeks in each of six different countries and in all of them made a point of visiting secondary schools. My chief object was to compare their conditions of preparation for university work with our own, to try to determine the value of the French 'baccalauréat,' the Italian 'licenzia,' the German, Czech and Norwegian 'matura' in terms of our own school and college years or points. I had no difficulty in obtaining permission from the different governments to visit their schools; in some of them such permission is no longer necessary since the establishment of the new democratic régimes. I tried to see something of all the classes whose work I was capable of judging, which were chiefly those in history, literature, and classical and modern languages. While not claiming to have made any special study of conditions in modern language teaching, I always saw what was being done in that line and visited many classes in French, German, English and Italian in the course of the year, so that my impressions may prove of interest to teachers in this country.

During my stay in French-Switzerland, I was able to see the higher secondary schools for boys and girls in two of the cantons and visited various classes in German and English. The former is required in all secondary schools: English or Italian replaces Greek in the scientific and technical courses. I was surprised to find conditions so much like those in our own high schools, for I had supposed that in a bi-lingual, or rather tri-lingual country, like Switzerland, I should find all the students very fluent in the use of other languages than their own. I found, however, some very old-fashioned teaching, quite in the old book-method: reading aloud, translation and explanation of difficult forms and constructions, with only a very halting attempt to give a résumé of part of the reading in the foreign tongue as a modern feature. The work was in the fourth and fifth year in German, but the results were no

better than our very average high school seniors can show. In both schools the English seemed to be better taught, though that may have been the merest chance. At least the students understood it and were interested in the work though their pronunciation was quite poor. In short, conditions in these schools seemed much as they are with us. There was no fixed standard of method or achievement but the value of the work depended entirely on the ability and energy of the individual teacher.

It is only fair to say that there is much dissatisfaction at present with the work of the higher government schools in some of the cantons and many projects for reform are under discussion. I should have enjoyed visiting some of the new experimental schools, the "*écoles libres*," but could not arrange it on account of time. One experiment interested me very much,—a school where, on the theory that it is better to concentrate attention on one subject than to scatter it over many,—the plan has been adopted of teaching only two subjects at a time.

The work is arranged in a cycle of three weeks, each week being devoted to the study of two subjects only. They occupy the whole school time, which is divided into two periods of two hours each separated by a rather long recreation. The first week is devoted to French and Mathematics, the second to Natural Science and German, the third to Geography with History and to English. The pupils are said to gain so much by the concentration of attention and effort and to enter so thoroughly into the subjects studied that the two weeks which elapse before they are taken up again bring practically no loss of power. The experiment has been continued for two or three years and is said to give excellent results. It would certainly be very interesting and instructive for any of us to visit that school and to see that work.

In Italy I visited many classes in the '*licei*' or advanced secondary schools of Rome and Florence. Latin is the first foreign language taught in them; it is begun in the first year and continued through all the eight years of the course. In the third year French is required for all and is continued for four years, while in the next year, the fourth school year, a third foreign language is begun and carried through the remaining five years: Greek in the '*liceo classico*,' German or English in the '*liceo moderno*.' Classes in the latter language have increased since the war but there are

still large classes in German in all the schools I visited. Here, too, I found a good many older teachers still using the old book-method, varied by an occasional question in the language taught, but young men and women were teaching by the direct method very much as do our better teachers here. Girls desiring to gain the 'licenzia' and to enter the universities are allowed to prepare in the 'liceo' or higher boys' school, as it did not seem necessary on first opening the universities to women to provide special schools for the small number who wished to avail themselves of this privilege. When the war drove them into the universities in constantly increasing numbers, there was no money to care for them elsewhere, so we have, in a country peculiarly addicted to the segregation of the sexes, the curious phenomenon of co-education in the higher secondary schools. There is as yet great difference of opinion as to its success and its future. At present it is a necessity and will be so until the financial condition of the country is better than at present.

The teachers in these 'licei' are almost all men, though the positions are theoretically open to free competition. There are a very few women who have been successful in gaining such positions by examinations or in keeping those which they occupied during the war, when they were called upon to take the places of the men teachers at the front and to carry on the schools which, but for them must have been closed. Most of these women have been displaced by men coming back from the army. The women teachers I met in the 'licei' were all in modern language work and I saw some excellent teaching in English done by one of them, quite the best I met with anywhere except in Germany. This lady had managed to inspire her pupils with a real interest in modern English poetry and they knew a great deal about Elizabeth and Robert Browning and their work. In general, the reading of foreign literature in the Italian and Swiss, as well as in the French schools, seems to be carried on by means of books of selections like our old-fashioned school readers, which give few pages from each author preceded by a couple of lines about his life and work. My experience this year has confirmed my old impression that such books kill all interest in literature. Far better read one story or drama than any number of such fragments of literature. The only classes I saw which were really interested in their work with such books were those that were

reading lyric poetry; naturally enough, since lyric poems can be given *in toto*, not hacked into bits. As well try to teach appreciation of sculpture by showing a collection of marble hands, ears and noses, instead of one or two complete statues.

I was surprised to hear from several teachers in these Italian schools that the children dread and dislike the Latin and find it a terrible burden. I had expected to find in these young Italians a love for the language which their own still so closely resembles, and in the Latin classes I visited it was evident that they read it with much more ease than do our pupils. Still it seems that they do not like it and that they flock into the 'liceo moderno' where they have only 38 hours of Latin instead of 44 as in the classical 'liceo,' and which substitutes 17 hours of German or English for the same number in Greek.

My observations during this journey have helped confirm me in the conviction, which has been growing for years, that we can hope to excite interest in ancient languages and literatures in our children only by approaching them through the modern ones. We are still following, as does Italy, the method inherited from the Renaissance of giving our children their first contact with foreign nations and a foreign culture through the classics. But the world has changed very much in the last two thousand years. European civilization no longer centers about the Mediterranean basin but leadership has passed to the northern nations of Europe. If these young Romans find it easier and more interesting to read French, German or English than Latin, what can we expect from our pupils who are separated not only by twenty centuries of time, but by four thousand miles of ocean, from Greek and Roman civilization? Every child should first study a foreign language somewhat akin to his own, which he can be expected to read with some ease, to understand and even to speak a little. This will give him access to a literature, which though differing from his own, has a content he can understand and which will stimulate his curiosity and interest by leading him to compare his own ideas and ideals with these other kindred though different ones. Having taken this step, he may be ready to go still further, to realize that a language now dead may once have been really alive, to enjoy tracing the deep influence Greece and Rome have exerted and still continue to exert on the literary, artistic and political ideals of all modern nations, his own

included. I think the time is coming in Europe, no less than here, though perhaps later there than here, when the classical languages will be studied only in the latest years of the higher schools, here probably only in college, but when they will nevertheless be more widely read and enjoyed than they are at present.

What I saw of modern language teaching in France was in connection with visits to three of the best 'lycées de jeunes filles' of that country. The work was in general well done, by young and energetic teachers and by modern methods, all teachers in France being thoroughly well prepared for their work and gaining their positions by rigorous competitive examinations given by the government. Yet even here one sees that no examinations can test the real power to teach well and I sat through one class as tedious and unprofitable both for me and the pupils as could be found anywhere. It was, however, decidedly the exception and even in this it was evident that the teacher knew her subject although she could not "get it across" to the class. Yet at least she spoke the foreign tongue to them and they got something beside the dead letter of the book. I saw classes in English, German, and Italian doing very nice work in these schools.

I will take this opportunity to explain my reference to the teaching of Spanish in these countries which was printed in "Notes and News" in the October *Journal* and which has brought forth protests from several of our readers. The passage was taken from a rather hurriedly written letter and gave merely the impression of the moment. It should be modified but not essentially changed. Spanish is doubtless taught in Italian universities, but in the three that I visited no course was being given in this subject last spring. Spanish may also be offered for the baccalauréat in France, but I found no classes in the subject in any of the schools which I happened to visit. German, on the other hand, was being taught in all the higher schools visited in each of the three countries. It is evident that in Europe the attitude of educational authorities and of the public toward the question of which languages are most important for young people to study, is very different from our own.

I was very much interested while in Paris in attending some of the examinations for the 'licence ès lettres.' The examinations for the baccalauréat, though open to the public, are so arranged

that it is practically impossible to hear the questions of the examiners or the answers of the candidates. But with the 'licence' it is different. The examiner generally sits at a small table with the student under examination in a chair beside him or across the table from him, and there is no objection made to anyone walking in and taking his place among the candidates awaiting their turn, who are all, of course, listening intently, hoping to get an idea of the kind of questions asked and the kind of answers approved. The examination in German was very informal. Each candidate read aloud a few lines from a book handed him by the professor. He then translated the passage, the professor helping him rather freely and asking him a number of questions, some in the language itself, others in French, about the subject matter. The whole examination of one candidate lasted generally not longer than five minutes. On the whole, the examiners in this and other subjects seemed to me to be very kindly. Their effort was to find out what a student knew rather than what he did not know. When he could not answer easily, the professor generally tried another question. I think things are being made a little easier for students whose studies have been interrupted by the war, as was the case with several of those I heard tested. There was a good sprinkling of girls in each group, taking their place among the men without fear or favor, a great change from the days when I worked at the Sorbonne in the 90's, when all women were there more or less on sufferance, and when a French woman student was almost unknown.

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